Vocation Homily, George Herbert, and the Cultural Criticism: A Review Essay

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The new historical movement has now been with us more than two decades, and has generally displaced the ideological anthropology and linguistics of structuralism and deconstruction to become (under the banner of cultural studies) the ruling force in contemporary literary criticism. We are now sufficiently distant from the movement's beginning to have texts on hand that pursue cultural studies as later contributions to an established school, reapplying the founders' methods and interacting with other similarly-motivated critical works. Cristina Malcolmson's recent study of George Herbert[1] is such a text; and it shows not only the continuing interest in new-historical method, but also the dangers that the method encounters amidst the complex interaction between its ideological critique, its employed historical texts, and the artistic figure concerned. I hope to show, in the context of examining Malcolmson's analysis of Herbert's work, the dangers of reduction implicit in cultural studies' deterministic subordination of history. Although presumptions of structure can be shown to direct and motivate all historical analyses, in cultural studies the avowed historical *modus operandi* passes from open-ended tact to explicit interpretive pressure, from a commitment to articulating what happened as sympathetically and accurately as possible to a straightforward subduing of a complex of events to a determinate historical process. Under such interpretive pressure, the tonal distinctions and details of the sources often blur, becoming a sort of scrim to be torn aside in order to reveal the expected psychological or sociopolitical machinery. This sort of interpretive pressure is what makes recent literary studies seem "a mission in cultural eugenics,"[2] out of touch with the real aesthetic experiences that made such studies possible.

Malcolmson's study evades "the devotionalism that, until recently, has been the focus of Herbert criticism" (1) by advocating a cultural materialist interpretation of the poet's career. Herbert is cast as a failed "client in the Protestant faction headed by William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke" (6), a client whose options were dictated by his position as a younger son in the English aristocracy. In early and mid-career, Herbert is portrayed by Malcolmson as endorsing his faction's pious legitimations of innovative business and colonialism–sanctified aristocratic–capitalist ambition that she finds self-deceptive and opportunistic, but nevertheless more attractively progressive than Herbert's late-career stance. This she characterizes as a reactionary revulsion toward his earlier willingness to compromise with impure capital.

The study begins with a review of the political misfortunes of the Protestant-leaning Pembroke faction during the ascendancy of Buckingham. Here Malcolmson repeatedly suggests that, under such constraining circumstances, pragmatic pursuit of wealth and prestige would sufficiently explain George Herbert's movements toward the country parsonage in Bemerton, and render unnecessary any recourse to religious motivations (22-24, 33). Malcolmson does allow to "Herbert's sincere devotional commitment" a subjective reality, but only in the context of maintaining that it did not really modify or ameliorate the socioeconomic pressures that determined the shape of his life (6). She interprets *The Country Parson*, his "Character and Rule of Holy Life," as a fictitious and self-compensatory autobiography (28, 33) that unintentionally forwarded the development of capitalist professionalism (45), and argues that Herbert's sacred verse was intended to be public–in some cases written for entertainments at Wilton House, and in all cases written in implicit dialogue with the Pembroke coterie.[3] For theological background, Malcolmson fields quotations from contemporary Protestant preachers who differentiated between a "general vocation" (the call for all to follow Christ) and a "particular vocation" (the work God calls a Christian to perform for humanity in workaday life). Malcolmson believes that these ministers insisted on uniting the two vocations, workaday life with

following Christ, out of reactionary anxiety over social mobility (4). Certainly there are explicit warnings about the unpleasant consequences of envy, covetousness, and ambition in such sermons and treatises[4]; but, as I will later show, Malcolmson's deployment of seventeenth-century Protestant thinkers within Max Weber's early twentieth-century sociological construct clouds some important differences between the preachers and neglects some noteworthy complexities in the social prescriptions they deduce from their callings.

Malcolmson's analysis of *The Temple* considers the Williams manuscript ("W") an early poetic effort "to hold together the genteel lifestyle and religious holiness through the doctrine of vocation" (72), and she claims that the printed collections (1633 and later, presumably derived from the posthumous Ms. Tanner 307, or "B") show Herbert revising his poems to remove implicit allusions to his earlier secular ambitions and suppressing autobiographical references to specifically personal religious concerns. The poems' final version is therefore seen as an abandonment of any attempt to balance Christian piety with personal secular success, a retreat from unifying the "two vocations" in favor of attempting a sincere response to the general calling, a response that Malcolmson psychologizes as "transparently" pious behavior.[5] I don't think Malcolmson is right to claim that such "transparency" marks a rigorist revulsion against efforts to unify particular and general callings, because the homilists she cites seem to me to have required piety at least as straightforward as that required by Herbert. But it does seem probable that Herbert's later poems show an intensifying rejection of worldly ambition, traces of which Malcolmson and others have convincingly detected in "The Churchporch" and in early letters.

Malcolmson's readings from the final recension of *The Church* are generally Marxian and hostile, portraying Herbert as a regressive cryptofeudal aesthete. She considers the religious consciousness Herbert wishes to endorse a cultural fiction that props non-egalitarian politics by providing a specious alternative to them (169), and she generally attempts to dissolve the artistic moments

of the poems back into the unpleasant sociopolitical forces that she argues to have produced them. "Love unknown," for instance, is a prolongation of unjust leases (163) and despotic oppression (167-68) into the afterlife; "The Elixir" is an attempt to foreclose on subversive discontent with menial work, and its argument provides a rationale for "the drudgery needed for the maintenance of the traditional order" (170); "Love [III]" is a seductive depiction of feudal submission to a benevolent lord, fraudulently softened by language implying low-church liturgical practices that Herbert did not actually espouse (175-77). A final chapter reviewing landscape and statuary in gardens constructed by members of Herbert's family characterizes those gardens, and Herbert's poems "Paradise" and "The Church Militant," as descriptions of "a religious and social order that sanctifies the use of force for the purpose of reproducing this order, psychically in the individual, and physically in the New World" (204); and a conclusion positions Malcolmson's sociopolitical materialist reading of Herbert against recent attempts to appreciate the poet's experiential or transgressive subjectivity.

Malcolmson's study does show sensitivity to the multivalent and fertile role played by the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in Herbert's work. Cunning construction of religious artifacts, for instance, could in the Old Testament be seen either as an admirable service or as an empty imposture, depending on whether the artifact was offered as a depiction of a god or as a prescribed aid for worshipping God as nondepictable. This dual possibility Malcolmson links persuasively with Herbert's ambivalence toward his own art, his determination to locate the importance of his poetry in its gestures toward spiritual inwardness (76). Her characterization of Herbert's religious humility and her enumeration of the psychological postures made available to him by that humility show genuine interest in the human qualities that enabled the writing of *The Temple*–interest of the sort we see in earlier studies by Izaak Walton and George Herbert Palmer (66-67). And her aware-

ness of the Pembroke circle's involvement with the ethos of Philip Sidney prompts her to suggest convincingly that Sidneian technique can be seen at work in Herbert's poems (104–7).

The weaknesses of Malcolmson's readings, on the other hand, reflect the problems of the sociopolitical trend in criticism that her study explicitly seeks to forward. The citations from Protestant divines, so important to the book's historical basis, have a ring of proof-texting: the sermons do not seem really to engage Malcolmson's interest apart from their availability as Herbert-contemporary evidence of emergent Protestant progressivism along the lines of Weberian theory. Take for example Malcolmson's exposition of Herbert's claim in *The Country Parson* that parishioners "labour profanely, when they set themselves to work like brute beasts, never raising their thoughts to God, nor sanctifying their labour with daily prayer." [6] This stricture "echoes the warnings of Perkins and other writers on vocation," she says, "but the image of the 'brute beasts' reveals [Herbert's] class origins: it surprisingly links energetic effort with a lack of civility and follows tradition by suggesting that manual labor and commerce are forms of defilement" (123; see also 170). But is Herbert really betraying himself and going beyond the opinions of the vocation preachers when he compares profane laborers to beasts? Indeed he is, but not in Malcolmson's sense, for Perkins himself held, in his *Treatise of the Vocations*, that diligent, peaceable laborers who failed to offer their labor to God were not merely like beasts, but worse than beasts:

> In the same field, at the same time, in the same businesse, there is the work of the oxe, and the worke of a man; now I demand which of these twaine is the better worke? I know the answer wil be, the work of the man; but the truth is, unlesse he be renewed by the grace of God, his labour is worse then the labour of the beast; for the beast in his kinde obeyes God, so doth not the unrepentant sinner.[7]

Herbert was not betraying aristocratic reflexes in his beast trope, but theological reflexes: failure to turn toward God caused one to slip down the chain of being, but did not (as was maintained by Perkins's hardline Calvinist stance) completely erase creaturely goodness.

That Malcolmson's hermeneutic of suspicion, her determination to detect in Herbert a sense of injured aristocratic merit, should lead to slips of this sort is not surprising, since she openly claims the right to depart from textual evidence when her own sociopolitical expectations lead in a different direction: "Herbert openly attacks this sense [of a taint in manual labor] in 'The Church-porch,' but I believe that he felt it himself nevertheless, especially when the lack of preferment opened him up so much more fully to the loss of gentry status through downward mobility" (98). A more accurate and genuinely historical response would allow the data to lead us to the most likely conclusions, in spite of the generalizations widely applicable to a person's origin and class. And the evidence seems to me explicit and clear that George Herbert worked hard to rid himself of aristocratic fastidiousness and that he succeeded to an admirable degree in fulfilling his own injunction from "The Church-porch":

> Kneeling ne'er spoil'd silk stocking: quit thy state.
> All equall are within the churches gate (ll. 407-8).

Malcolmson might seem from her arguments to lack interest in the real variety that individual human beings display when dealing with socioeconomic constraints–at one point, for instance, she argues that George Herbert's failure to obtain preferment "cannot simply be the result of a personal disenchantment with the court, since his brothers Edward Herbert and Thomas Herbert suffered from the same difficulty" (6). Certainly there is a sense in which politics and economics determined the shape of the Herbert family's life. But when we consider the art of George Herbert, it is just as important to note the Herbert brothers' remarkably various inclinations and temperaments, and their evident choices to respond to the Pembroke faction's difficulties in very different ways.

Malcolmson believes, in short, that sociopolitical forces were the driving impulse and main determinant behind the treatises of the Protestant divines and the poems of George Herbert, and I think that this belief tends to compromise the sensitivity, the probability, and the proportion of her readings from both. The preachers are generally characterized as confused and nervous progressives, endorsing secular work in a new religiously-intense way while attempting to use religion to prevent class mobility and keep progress (defined teleologically by contemporary egalitarian professionalism) under control. But close inspection of the preachers' works will reveal important differences in attitude, both toward social mobility and toward the relationship between vocation and sociopolitical authority. William Perkins's *A Treatise on the Vocations*, which defined "general" and "personal" or "particular" callings for later writers, recommends that adults choose their vocations after careful self-analysis and good advice, and that they give studied attention to their children's aptitudes before deciding to train them for trade or as clerics (758-59). For Perkins, all callings are to service, and so long as service is the motive, no calling lawfully pursued can be either too low or too high. While he denounces avarice and vanity as motives for taking up a calling (756-57, 767), he positively encourages pursuit (through established channels) of callings considered higher, with Christian ministry considered the highest (759, 762). His style and manner resonate with the fresh enthusiasm of early humanist Protestantism, and he has sufficient confidence in individual judgment to openly advocate disobeying authorities who impose requirements that are unacceptable for religious reasons (757-58).[8]

Robert Sanderson, on the other hand, shows all the concern for control of social mobility that Malcolmson attributes to the preachers, and then some. His *Fourth Sermon Ad Populum* opens with a warning against any neglect of social obligation that might use the "general" religious calling as an excuse (237-38)[9]; and he terms workaday vocations "particular" and "outward" rather than "personal." Every possible motivation–respect, courage, self-doubt, pride, modesty–is carefully summoned to persuade children to ac-

cept training chosen for them against their inclinations by their parents (261-263); indeed, Sanderson would advise us always to suspect our inclinations, for God no longer works through direct promptings (254) and the human heart is desperately wicked (263); instead, the objective criterion of ability should guide us–and this is to include not only mental and bodily ability but "Birth, Wealth, Honour, Authority, Reputation, Kinred, Alliance" (264). Lateral movement is permitted because sometimes it can't be helped; upward mobility is permitted because promotions need to happen so that certain professions can continue (269). Any idealism envisioning service to God and fellow man is buried under concern for optimum social organization, and even Sanderson's pitch for the Christian ministry has an overripe savor of establishment:

> In the judging of our Abilities, we should have a regard to the outward *circumstances* of *times* and *places*, and the rest. Those *gifts*, which would have made a sufficient Priest, in the beginning of *the Reformation*, in that dearth of learning, and penury of the Gospel, now the times are full of knowledge and learning, would be all little enough for a *Parish-Clerk*. (264)

Whereas Perkins leaves the individual Christian alone before God in his peroration (777-79), Sanderson concludes by making religious observance a matter of obligation, self-interest, and duty–a mainstay against typical corruptions in various fields of work (273).

These details seem to me to show that the Protestant preachers' attempts to structure seventeenth-century life around "general" and "personal" callings did not produce a predictable and identifiable mode of compromise between class solidarity and social mobility. If it is right to say that George Herbert was drawn for a while into a moderately worldly attempt to combine upper-class office seeking with serving God, and that he finally rejected this attempt in favor of constant and explicit Christian piety, it is at least as likely that the vocation preachers forwarded the rejection as it is that they forwarded the moderation. None of Herbert's unworldlinesses exceeds in severity Perkins's insistence that "it is not sufficient to do a lawful action, but it must be done in holy

manner: for lawfull actions unlesse they be sanctified, are sins" (766). Indeed, the whole paradigm of unintentionally progressive bourgeois compromise in the preachers and socially regressive aristocratic severity in the later Herbert needs to be questioned. If Perkins and Sanderson truly indicate two social tendencies in vocation homily, greater severity in prioritizing the religious motive actually correlates with a greater rather than a lesser openness to social mobility and individual freedom.

Malcolmson, on the other hand, characterizes George Herbert as a conservative, mistrustful of his own subjectivity (127-30), aristocratic but forced by unfavorable politics to accept preferment to a small ecclesiastical living; and she hypothesizes that the poet came to terms with this setback by progressively masking upper-class disdain for manual labor as an emphatic endorsement of God as sole laborer in all professional and spiritual successes. The evident revisions in some of Herbert's poems, from "W" to "B," are then read by Malcolmson as support for this thesis; but these examinations seem to me only to show that the revisions in question need not contradict the thesis; and Malcolmson's study's unremitting socioeconomic focus often elides other plausible motives for the noticed revisions of "W." For example, the "W" poem "Perfection," revised in that manuscript to "The Elixir," is foregrounded by Malcolmson as an example of Herbert retreating in late career from any implied endorsement of social mobility. Here are the two versions of the poem:

Perfection	*The Elixir*
Lord teach me to referr	Teach me, my God and King,
All things I doe to thee	In all things thee to see,
That I not only may not err	And what I do in any thing,
But allso pleasing be.	To do it as for thee:
A man that looks on glasse,	Not rudely, as a beast,
On it may stay his eye:	To runne into an action;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe	But still to make thee prepossest,
And then the heav'n espy.	And give it his perfection.
He that does ought for thee	A man that looks on glasse,
Marketh that deed for thine:	On it may stay his eye;

And when the Divel shakes the tree, Thou saist, this fruit is mine.	Or if he pleaseth, through it passe, And then the heav'n espie.
All may of thee partake: Nothing can be so low Which with his tincture (for thy sake) Will not to Heaven grow.	All may of thee partake: Nothing can be so mean, Which with his tincture (for thy sake) Will not grow bright and clean.
A servant with this clause Makes drudgerie divine. Who sweeps a chamber for thy Laws, Makes that and th'action fine.	A servant with this clause Makes drudgerie divine: Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, Makes that and the action fine.
But these are high perfections: Happy are they that dare Lett in the light to all their actions And show them as they are.	This is the famous stone That turneth all to gold: For that which God doth touch and own Cannot for lesse be told.

Malcolmson analyzes the "Perfection" version of this poem as follows:

> The servant in [" Perfection"] is a far more troublesome figure than in the final revision, since his or her "knowledge of religion" results in actions that verge on "high perfections" (21) in the divine scale of value. The stanza on the servant explicitly and consistently upsets the hierarchical social norm, since the word "chamber" (19) emphasizes the difference between the householder and those he or she serves. The word "fine" (20) also intentionally challenges the upper-class notion of elegance and cultivation associated with the word and suggests much more pointedly than in the revision that individuals first measured as "low" can overturn upper-class expectations as they "grow" upwards on earth, as it is in heaven. The "high perfections" (21) that the poem itself makes possible to servants become too threatening, and the last stanza warns its reader and its author to beware of the motives that lie behind their desire for such an ascent. (171)

This interpretation seems to me to have become special pleading, in which the urging of a certain agenda takes precedence over clarifying what the poems say and what Herbert's revision implies. Is the first version of the fifth stanza really more "explicitly and consistently" subversive than the second? Is there sufficient war-

rant for claiming that the change from "chamber" to "room" was motivated by fear of lower-class ambition? Are "upper-class expectations" truly overturned more by the "fine" sweeping of the "low" than by the "fine" sweeping of the "mean"? Malcolmson seems to me to presume her interpretation so energetically that its momentum prevents her from understanding the point of the first version's final stanza–not that one ought to allow God to sift one's motives for aiming high, but that one ought to allow God to grant a consistent consciousness of divine service being behind one's every action. In fact, if we reverse the order of the poems, assuming for the sake of argument that "The Elixir" had been revised into "Perfection," we could make at least as convincing a case for Herbert having been motivated by worries about lower-class ambition as Malcolmson has for the extant scenario.[10]

It is also curious that Malcolmson ignores the evident internal and literary motives for these changes. As F.E. Hutchinson noticed, Herbert's immediate impulse toward revision seems most probably to have been an attempt to make the fourth stanza's alchemical "tincture" the central metaphor of the poem. In "Perfection," the dedicated deed appears under three metaphorical descriptions: a translucent window, fruit on a tree, and an alchemically-transformed lower element; and it is the window metaphor that is recovered and elaborated in the concluding stanza. In "The Elixir," the fruit metaphor, weakest and least similar to the others, is eliminated in favor of focusing on the transformative and enlightening powers attributed to the "philosophers' stone." Accordingly, the rhyming pair "low" and "grow," which continued the fruit metaphor in "Perfection," is replaced in "The Elixir" by "mean" and "bright and clean," which evoke translucent glass and transmuted metal. Since the revised poem will conclude alchemically, the enlightened perception of a sweeping task is pressed for a more transformative dynamic: "chamber" already has "fine" connotations, but use of the single-syllable "room" eliminates these and also enables an echo of the new first stanza's "as for thee." This literary explanation for Herbert's changes would seem to me to be more warranted and probable than Malcolmson's political speculations;

and I think it important that ideological readings be advanced in the context of recognizing such details. Malcolmson instead either fails to see the literary aspect of the revision, or else consciously suppresses it, for her analysis quotes "Perfection" at length without including its third stanza (170-71).

Similar omissions compromise Malcolmson's claim that Herbert's "The Flower" communicates feudalistic recoil from "willed self-cultivation that is both distinctly human and inevitably sinful" (147). Here and throughout the study, Malcolmson persistently ascribes to Herbert the belief that energetic personal exertion amounts to sin and needs to be eliminated; but the three stanzas missing from her quotation (second, third, sixth) effectively resist this simplification, as Herbert marvels at his "recover'd greenness," wonders at God making his "passing-bell" into a "chiming," exults in his opportunity despite worldly misfortune to write:

> And now in age I bud again,
> After so many deaths I live and write;
> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing: O my onely light,
> It cannot be
> That I am he
> On whom thy tempests fell all night.

"Thy word is all, if we could spell," Herbert says: God is the source both of the "spring-showre" misperceived and misused, and of the "tempests" that end such vagaries; and the humility and gratitude of acknowledging this produces–not a blinkered fear of transgressive egoism, but the "dew and rain And relish" of George Herbert's savored versing experience. I do not feel Malcolmson is correct when she says that this stanza indicates a patriarchal superior's confining norm enforcement, and that it minimizes any "traces of human creativity" (152-53).[11]

Malcolmson's treatment of "The Flower" displaces considerably the matter least congenial to her argument: the poem's sixth stanza appears several pages after the poem's main exposition. But one of the texts most inconvenient to Malcolmson's claims about Herbert's character emerges in her arguments more than

one hundred pages after the end of her chapter on *The Country Parson*, the work in which the passage appears. Here the passage is, with a sentence of contextual lead-in, followed by Malcolmson's exposition.

> If the Parson were ashamed of particularizing in these [reproofs and encouragements of his parishioners at home,] hee were not fit to be a Parson: but he holds the Rule, that Nothing is little in Gods service: If it once have the honour of that Name, it grows great instantly. Wherfore neither disdaineth he to enter into the poorest Cottage, though he even creep into it, and though it smell never so lothsomly. For both God is there also, and those for whom God dyed: and so much the rather doth he so, as his accesse to the poor is more comfortable, then to the rich; and in regard of himselfe, it is more humiliation. (248-49)

> In this passage the genteel, sophisticated parson actually confronts the laborer whose poverty he likes to affect in his poetry, and his intense reaction against entering the cottage testifies to his acute consciousness of breaking the rules of social decorum by doing so and his deep fear of the polluting effects of this transgression. To "creep" into the cottage is to risk contracting its commonness, which here threatens like a contagious disease. The Parson's anxiety over this encounter is measured by his inability to describe the people themselves in this cottage, whom he can only grasp as "those for whom God dyed." Herbert attempts to counteract this powerful class reaction by invoking Christian inversions of hierarchy; the passage recalls the explosion of social decorum in "Redemption," when the husbandman confronts Christ amidst the thieves and murderers. But the Parson's "humiliation" here is deeply ambiguous, since it both lowers him to the level of the poor laborers he visits and identifies him with the redeeming Christ who brought comfort to the poor rather than to the rich. (173-74)

Here, even more than in the claims about Herbert's "Elixir" revision, I find that the poet's text is being pressured unconscionably in order to support the sentiments Malcolmson would ascribe to him. Candor about the real discomforts in visiting the poor becomes an "acute consciousness of breaking the rules of social deco-

rum" and "deep fear" of being polluted by commonness. It is as if Malcolmson would bully Herbert into expressing the very aristocratic fastidiousness that his text straightforwardly proscribes. Proud social disapproval is not expressed, but effectively excluded in Herbert's willingness to mention the need to stoop and "creep" into a cottage with bad odor, and Malcolmson's simile likening the unpleasant smell to a "contagious disease" emanates more from her own modern knowledge of the dangers of bad sanitation than from any gesture to be found in Herbert's text. Furthermore, since the immediate context of the passage at issue champions service to God as a motive unanswerably honorable, why should we read Herbert's endorsement of the valuable humanity of all "those for whom God dyed" as though it were an anxiety-ridden "inability to describe the people themselves"? Does the passage indeed identify Herbert's Parson "with the redeeming Christ"? And if so, would such an identification necessarily compromise the social humiliation that Herbert is clearly espousing? I find these attempts to replace the Parson's explicit social humility with implicit aristocratic pride unconvincing, and Malcolmson's ensuing allowance that Herbert may have been doing the best he could I find unjustifiably patronizing.

> In this passage and the experience it describes, Herbert may have honestly and decently tried to step outside the definitive power of the status system; certainly, we can see here that his "plain style" was no utopian pastoral aesthetic, but a model of Christian identity used to control his class responses and govern his everyday behavior in his rural community. Nevertheless, the brightness and cleanness that characterizes this plain style, and that he so desperately misses in this cottage, is centuries away from egalitarianism. If sweeping a "room" in "The Elixir" refers to sanctifying and purifying any worldly office or action, then we can see that such holiness was in part a method of protecting Herbert from the "mean" activities he describes in this passage. (174)

Malcolmson's persistent detection of desperation in Herbert's tone remains speculative here even if we grant the sociopolitical subtext on which it depends. The Herbert texts at issue not only sanctify and purify, but also dignify servants sweeping and people in pov-

erty; and the *Country Parson* excerpt does not communicate self-protection, but sternly admonishes readers to avoid self-protective aristocratic fastidiousness.

I have said that the weaknesses of Malcolmson's readings emanate from the new historical criticism she wishes to forward. Her study follows current trends in leftist literary history by refraining from deconstructive denial of the significatory powers of language, which undermines both leftist and non-leftist histories when applied consistently; and she is wary of the private-public distinctions that undergird bourgeois psychoanalyses and the post-structuralisms dependent on them (264). But the cultural criticism's insistence on positioning all texts within a deterministic historical and psychological process can compromise one's abilities as a careful, open reader just as effectively as subjective psychoanalysis. The point can be made best, perhaps, by offering two brief examples of this dynamic at work in Stephen Greenblatt's provocative *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, a text foundational to most cultural critical work of the last two decades, and certainly influential in Malcolmson's.

Greenblatt's study subjects various Renaissance texts to the pressures of post-industrial sexual expressivism.[12] His treatment of Sir Thomas Wyatt[13] focuses on a rendering of select penitential Psalms that the Protestant sonneteer adapted from an Italian prose paraphrase by Pietro Aretino. Wyatt's selection[14] follows Aretino's mode of presentation, which employs dramatic introductions and continuos before and between the Psalm translations, imaginative contexts freely developed from David's adultery with Bathsheba, his murder of her husband Uriah, and the ensuing rebellion of his son Absalom.[15] Greenblatt claims that "by using the Bathsheba story as the context for the entire sequence, the Renaissance in effect sexualizes what in the original is a broader expression of sinfulness and anxiety" (122). But the Bathsheba story is clearly cited in Psalm 51's ancient title, well-known from the Vulgate and elsewhere: none of the other Psalms selected by Aretino and Wyatt is given a historical frame in the original, and 51 is the only scriptural Psalm that is ascribed to a distinct repentance nar-

rative. Furthermore, Aretino and Wyatt actually deemphasize David's adultery with Bathsheba, which event tends to disappear amidst mythologized technical explanations for the process of erotic infatuation: the drawing of David's vision to Bathsheba's beauty and the ensuing error of considering that beauty "thing of thinges best" (l. 16) leads directly to the murder of Uriah and its fraudulent concealment.[16] Textual warrant is also lacking in Greenblatt's claims about Aretino's and Wyatt's depiction of David

> Inflamd with farr more hote effect
> Of god then he was erst of Bersabe (ll. 317-18).

Greenblatt submits that this comparison indicates a blighted and repressive psychological "transference" of sexual passion from Bathsheba to God (122), an analysis that I think unduly dependent on the persistent ideological pressure of his selective and doctrinaire post-industrial reading. If we approach these lines of "hote effect" through the immediately preceding preternatural light on David's harp-strings,

> The torne wheroff into his Iyes did sterte,
> Surprisd with Joye by penance off the herte (ll. 315-16),

the imposition becomes evident. Even readers disinclined to question the totalizing assumptions about sex that undergird Greenblatt's work might notice that such analysis does not explain or do justice to Aretino's and Wyatt's depiction of David's reenergized vision. Malcolmson's pressing of Herbert's relished versing into a requisite cringing before a patriarchal superior is no more counterintuitive than this.

My second example comes from Greenblatt's expressivist critique of Shakespeare's *Othello* (232 ff.). In this case, interpretive pressure is built up by Greenblatt's recalling, in a tone of stern arraignment, various warnings by ancient, medieval, and Renaissance Christians against sexual excess: attention is given, especially, to those claiming that "active *pursuit* of pleasure in [marital] sexuality is damnable" (249). However, the sentiments Greenblatt disapprovingly discusses are thoroughly humane and comprehensible when they are understood as attempts to combat, from a philosophical and religious angle, the tendency of sex to become narcissistic.[17] Interestingly parallel efforts were being made by

secular psychologists during the time that *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* was being written–Masters and Johnson and Germaine Greer come to mind. Greenblatt would have it that Shakespeare's play presents a subliminal vitiation of Othello the Moor by Christian disapproval of marital enjoyment, and that Desdemona's "frank acceptance of pleasure" with Othello is to be considered a cause of Othello's murderous rage not secondary to Iago's slander (250). I would submit, on the contrary, that this pressured reading lacks warrant, either in the Christian moral and confessional practices Greenblatt cites or in the text of Shakespeare's play. Othello and Desdemona do not have the exploitative or narcissistic attitude toward venery that the Christian thinkers sought to combat. Their erotic relationship is (unlike that of Cassio and Bianca) both reciprocal and committed, and it is the presumed violation of this treasured commitment and reciprocity that overthrows Othello. The Moor does not call his wife a whore for enjoying the pleasures of marriage, but for promiscuously bestowing those pleasures on Cassio, a fiction Iago imposes on him by exploiting both the brevity of Othello and Desdemona's wholesome relationship and the Moor's status as a cultural and racial outsider. Greenblatt bills his reading an exposure of "the colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality" (242), but it could more accurately be said to manifest the colonial power of late twentieth-century sexual expressivism over Shakespeare's art. Malcolmson's preemptive insistence on the Country Parson's aristocratic pride is more than matched by Greenblatt's preemptive assertion of Othello's subliminal nervousness about sex.

At the beginning of her study, Malcolmson quotes Raymond Williams's dictum that, "instead of reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions," good analysis of literary works should be "capable of discerning, in good faith, [their] finite but significant openness."[18] It seems to me that fixity and finitude are propagated, not avoided, when literary artifacts produced under earlier historical models are peremptorily trimmed to fit contemporary economic, political, social, and sexual histories. One recent observer of literary studies has noted that,

> While [in leading academic programs in literature] one may still report that at places like Johns Hopkins, in some sense of the term, "historicism is still central," it is its demystifying rather than its imaginatively sympathetic power that is applied–its power to see through rather than to understand.[19]

Openness with good faith would mandate a tactful, tentative acceptance of human pursuits of love, wisdom, and beauty even when those pursuits are in some ways fundamentally at variance with a reader's own beliefs and priorities. Demystification of preindustrial art–that is, reduction of it to contemporary scientific and cultural models–may seem invigorating and powerful for a time, but such empowerment leads to distortions and oversimplifications that can hardly be defended as goods. Humanity does not need to be demystified. Rather, its texts need to be read, sympathetically thought along with, courteously argued against. For this interchange to be meaningful, we need as much historical background as we can get, but "an author's date can never declare what he meant."[20]

Notes

[1] *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic.* Stanford Stanford University Press, 1999. xi + 297 pp. $45.00. References to Malcolmson's work below will appear as parenthetical citations.

[2] See Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 1: "Marxists, cultural materialists, post-structuralists, and deconstructive psychoanalysts, have converged in what has sometimes looked like a mission in cultural eugenics." Armstrong is a leftist talking to fellow leftists; but her assessment seems to me equally applicable to cultural criticism on the right.

[3] Malcolmson notes that Sidney claimed "that one's lyric powers could best be dedicated to God, a credo that Sidney did not follow himself" (47). Fulfilling this Sidneian possibility, she suggests, would have occurred to Herbert as a good way to elicit patronage from Pembroke.

[4] See for example William Perkins, *Works* (London: John Legate, 1606), pp. 767, 773; Robert Sanderson, *14 Sermons* (London: Printed by R.N. for Henry Seile, 1657), p. 270.

[5] Malcolmson's ideological geometry gets somewhat confusing here. "The character of holiness in the revised *Temple*," she says, "creates a model of selfhood in which the social role becomes a clear expression of the devotion within. This transparency lights up the darkness made possible by the original contrast between inside spirituality and outside gentility and dispels the possibility of private, hidden motives" (126). The psychology here, in which a factitious privacy enables a self-consoling publicity, I find somewhat difficult to imagine; and I don't see how straightforward expression of inner devotion makes the expressed devotion less privately motivated. Also, transparency isn't illuminative! But it is clear to me that Malcolmson means to describe the final intensification of Herbert's Christian commitment in non-appreciative materialist terms.

[6] F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 247-48. Citations below from Herbert are from this edition.

[7] Perkins, p. 766.

[8] Naturally, Perkins uses a worker being required to attend a Roman Catholic mass as his exemplary scenario for disobedience; but one remembers that the Puritan revolution depended heavily on this religious loophole.

[9] Citations are from the above-noted 1657 edition of *14 Sermons*.

[10] The first stanza of "The Elixir" valorizes the speaker's own motives, while the first stanza of "Perfection" vests success in "pleasing" the "Lord." The last stanza of "The Elixir" frankly contradicts aristocratic disdain for menial labor and implies that labor conventionally considered superior might actually not be; the last stanza of "Perfection," on the other hand, valorizes the act of changing one's perception without explicitly challenging the status quo.

[11] One notes that this stanza gives another recent new-historical reading of Herbert more pause. Michael Schoenfeldt avers that Herbert's words communicate "affirmation of the joy of creation," but claims that this joy contra-

dicts "the theological order the poem asserts" ; see *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtiership* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 150-51.

[12] By post-industrial expressivism, I mean the popular belief that sexual norms and taboos distort healthy behavior, and the opinion that, when one exerts one's will to oppose sexual impulses, the efforts psychologically resemble and predictably produce violence and hatred.

[13] *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 115 ff. References to Greenblatt below are by page from this edition.

[14] Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

[15] II Samuel 11-12, 15-17.

[16] Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson, eds., *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1969), pp. 98-101, 358-59. Quotations from Wyatt are cited by line from this edition.

[17] Greenblatt concedes that Christian thinkers acknowledged "the legitimate role of sexual pleasure" in marriage (248), but his insistence on the expressivist correlation of repression with violence seems to overwhelm any sympathetic understanding of the Christian thinkers' concerns that marital pleasure be an expression of love rather than a mere use of another body for self-pleasure.

[18] Raymond William, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 114.

[19] Avrom Fleishman, *The Condition of English: Literary Studies in a Changing Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 115.

[20] Rosemond Tuve, "Sacred 'Parody' of Love Poetry, and Herbert," in Thomas Roche, ed., *Essays by Rosemond Tuve: Spenser, Herbert, Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 247.